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ABSTRACT

The highly selective and politically shaped portrayals of violence and terror conceal rather than reveal the actual incidence and distribution of real violence and terror. These portrayals, including the choice of labels, serve as projective devices that isolate acts and people from meaningful contexts and set them up to be stigmatized and victimized. Symbolic uses benefit those who control them. They are usually states and media establishments, not small-scale or isolated actors or insurgents. The mass ritual of television presents a world which is power oriented. Though perpetrators of small-scale acts of violence and terror may occasionally force media attention and, in that sense, seem to advance their cause, in the last analysis such a challenge serves to enhance media credibility ("just reporting the facts") and is used to mobilize support for repression, often in the form of wholesale state violence and terror or military action, presented as justified by the provocation. (RS)

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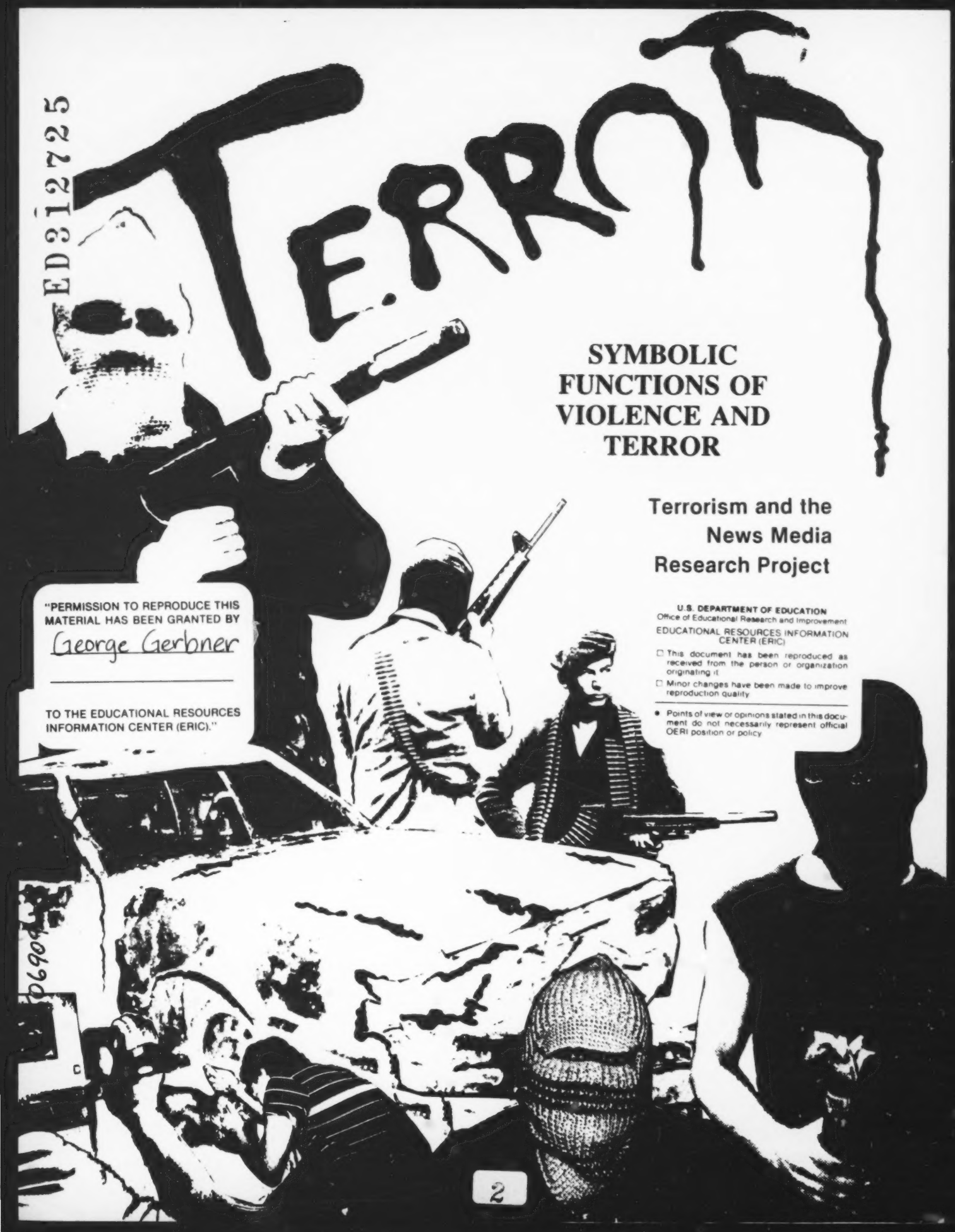

SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS OF VIOLENCE AND TERROR

Terrorism and the News Media Research Project

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Most of what we know, or think we know, we do not personally experience. Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of our species is that for all practical purposes we live in a world we erect through the stories we tell.

Violence and terror have a special role to play in this great story-telling process. They depict social forces in conflict. They dramatize threats to human integrity and the social order. They demonstrate power to lash out, provoke, intimidate, and control. They designate winners and losers in an inescapably political game.

These are all symbolic functions, the focus of my essay. I am not discussing acts of hurting and killing but of the selective and synthetic media re-creations of these acts and of the socio-political functions of these re-creations. In so doing I will draw on research of our own as well as of others I have summarized in a report for UNESCO (Gerbner, 1988).

My argument, in brief, is that symbolic uses benefit those who control them. They are usually states and media establishments, not small-scale or isolated actors or insurgents. Though perpetrators of small-scale acts of violence and terror may occasionally force media attention and, in that sense, seem to advance their cause, in the last analysis such a challenge serves to enhance media credibility ("just reporting the facts") and is used to mobilize support for repression often in the form of wholesale state violence and terror or military action, presented as justified by the provocation.

The highly selective and politically shaped portrayals of violence and terror conceal rather than reveal the actual incidence and distribution of real violence and terror. These portrayals, including the choice of labels, serve as projective devices that isolate acts and people from meaningful contexts and set them up to be stigmatized and victimized.

Stigma is a mark of disgrace that evokes disgraceful behavior. Calling some people barbarians makes it easier to act barbarically toward them. Presuming some people to be criminals permits dealing with them in ways otherwise considered criminal. Labeling a large group terrorists seems to justify terrorizing them. Declaring nations enemies makes it legitimate to attack and kill them. Calling some people crazy or insane makes it possible to suspend rules of rationality and decency. Stigma brands deviation from the norm as not only unusual and perhaps unjustified but as evil and sinful. It is one way a culture has to enforce its norms.

The persons stigmatized are the obvious targets, but the real victim of the process is a community's ability to think rationally and creatively about injustice.

The context in which this type of demonstration and socialization goes on is the historically unprecedented mass ritual of television violence and its cultivation of an inequitable sense of power and vulnerability. For the first time in human history we have manufactured a compelling symbolic environment not of the family, the neighborhood, the school, the church, and the selectively used print and film media but the mass ritual of television. It presents a world which, especially in prime time, is largely power-oriented. Its action dramas are by far the major sources of vivid images about violence and terror most people absorb daily beginning with infancy. News by and large has to compete in a marketplace of these dramatic appeals and preconceptions.

Prime time is a world in which men outnumber women three to one. Young people and old people and minorities have less than their share not only of representation but also of opportunities and power, but more than their share of vulnerability and victimization. Violence and terror perform the tasks of the unequal distribution of power. That is their symbolic function.

The typical viewer sees every week an average of 21 criminals (including "terrorists," domestic and foreign). Arrayed against them are 41 public and private law enforcers. (If they live so long, there are also an average of 14 doctors, 6 nurses, 6 lawyers, and 2 judges to deal with them.) Violence occurs an average of 6 times per hour in prime time, and over twenty times per hour in weekend daytime children's programming. We absorb an average of two entertaining murders a night. Neither fictional nor factual (news) violence and terror bear much relationship to their actual occurrence in our communities and the world. But they do cultivate an accommodation to the structure of power. Our research on television found that exposure to the pattern of media violence cultivates a differential sense of vulnerability and stigmatization, placing heavier burdens on selected minorities and nationalities.

This is the general context of pervasive and inescapable violent representations within which the labeling and depiction of terrorism and terrorists play out their symbolic social functions.

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Much of the controversy over press coverage of terrorism revolves around who should control the news, authorities or media. The contest is reminiscent of the symbiotic relationship of cooperation and conflict between the medieval state and church, in which the church usually emerged as the more credible cultural arm of society, at least until the coming of mass media. Liberal democracies, and even other states, tend to come to similar conclusions concerning the media. The Prevention of Terrorism Act, for example, was enacted in the United Kingdom in the wake of an IRA bombing in 1974 which killed 21 people and injured over 160. The Act suspends civil liberties for anyone suspected of supporting the IRA terrorism or withholding information about it. Under its provisions, the police seized a copy of a 15-minute untransmitted film shot by a BBC crew at an incident at Carrickmore. After a long debate in Parliament and in the press, the government decided not to prosecute the BBC, but rules on reporting terroristic acts were tightened.

Comparative studies of terrorist labeling and coverage reveal unreliable statistics and blatantly political uses. Although the media in the United States continued to put increasing emphasis on international terrorism throughout the 1970s, the authoritative chronology of transnational terrorism by Mickolus (1980) showed that the frequency of incidents peaked in 1972 with 480 that year, and subsequently declined to an average of 340 per year. Many of the reports focused, and still focus, on the Middle East. There has been no comparable coverage of prevalent state and anti-state terrorism in many countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

While the physical casualties of highly publicized terrorist acts have been relatively few, the political and military consequences have been far-reaching. The fate of governments, relations among states, scientific exchanges, tourism, and trade have been affected. International tensions, domestic repression, and support for counterviolence have increased. For example, although less than 1 percent of all casualties of international terrorism in 1985 were American, they prompted the forcing down of an Egyptian airliner and the bombing of Tripoli (probably based, as it turned out, on faulty intelligence).

Although international terrorism by and against states received most attention, Bassiouni (1981, 1982) and others pointed out that terrorist acts in a national context far outnumber international ones. Disappearances, bombings, kidnappings, and state violence in many countries, often unreported, claim thousands of times more victims than do well publicized acts of international terror.

Wurth-Hough (1983) documented the role of media coverage of terrorism in selecting events and defining issues for the public. Paletz, Fozzard, and Ayanian (1982) analyzed the *New York Times*' coverage of the IRA, the Red Brigades, and the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional (FALN) from July 1, 1977 to June 30, 1979 and found no basis for the charge that coverage legitimizes the cause of terrorist organizations. On the contrary, 70 percent of the stories mentioned neither the cause nor the objectives of the terrorists; almost 75 percent mentioned neither the organization nor its supporters; and the 7 percent that did mention names surrounded them with statements issued by authorities.

In a follow-up study of U.S. network news, Milburn *et al.* (1987) also noted the frequent omission of any causal explanation for terrorist acts, and the attribution of mental instability to terrorists and their leaders. (Similar acts directed against countries other than the United States were more frequently explained.) The implication, the researchers noted, was that "you can't negotiate with crazy people."

Knight and Dean (1982) provided a detailed account of how the Canadian press coverage of the siege and recapturing of the Iranian embassy in London from Arab nationalist "gunmen" served to assert the efficiency and legitimacy of violence by the British Special Forces. In the process of transforming crime and punishment into a selectively choreographed newsworthy event, the media "have to some extent assumed the functions of moral and political—in short, ideological—reproduction performed previously (and limitedly) by the visibility of the public event itself." It is not accidental, the authors claimed, that highly publicized and "morally coherent" scenarios of violence and terror have made public punishment unnecessary as demonstrations of state ideology and power.

Typically isolated from their historical and social context, denied description of conditions or cause, and portrayed as unpredictable and irrational, if not insane (see, for example, Milburn *et al.*, 1987), those labeled terrorists symbolize a menace that rational, humane, and democratic means cannot reach or control. In a domestic context of racial violence, Paletz and Dunn (1969) studied the effects of news coverage of urban riots and concluded that the attempt to present a view acceptable to most readers failed to illuminate the conditions in the black communities that led to the riots. News of civil disturbance shares with coverage of terrorist activity the tendency to cultivate a pervasive sense of fear and danger, and of the consequent acceptability of harsh measures to combat it.

De Boer (1979) summarized survey results in five countries and found that although terrorists claimed relatively few victims, the media coverage cultivated a sense of imminent danger that only unusual steps could overcome. Terrorism was considered a "very serious" problem by nine out of ten Americans and nearly as many British respondents. Six out of ten people in the Federal Republic of Germany considered it "the most important public event of the year."

Six or seven out of ten respondents in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Federal Republic of Germany favored the introduction of the death penalty for terrorists. Similar majorities approved using a "special force" that would hunt down and kill terrorists in any country; placing them "under strict surveillance, even though our country might then somewhat resemble a police state;" using "extra stern and harsh action" unlike against other criminals; and "limitations of personal rights by such measures as surveillance and house searches" in order to "combat terrorism."

Eight out of ten Germans in the Federal Republic approved a news embargo instituted after a kidnapping, and six out of ten thought that conversations between the accused and their lawyers should be monitored to prevent new acts of terrorism.

From one-fifth to over half of the respondents in the Federal Republic of Germany said that "one has to be careful" of what one says to avoid being considered sympathetic to terrorists. Sympathizers were considered to be those who oppose the death penalty, who believe their "lawyers have the right at all times to visit terrorists in prison," who think their "criticisms of our society to be justified in some respects," or who feel pity for them.

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Psychological research on individual aggression and violence has been the most widely publicized. It has also been relatively easy to refute. Critics of aggression research point to the difficulty of relating experiments to real life situations, question the validity of relating aggressive tendencies to actual violence, and charge that blaming most individual aggression or violence on the media distracts attention from underlying social influences and the greater threat of collective, official, organized, and legitimated violence. They recall Frederic Schiller's complaint: "It is criminal to steal a purse, daring to steal a fortune, a mark of greatness to steal a crown. The blame diminishes as the guilt increases."

Indeed, most research on the effects of violence has been generated by fears that violence and terror in the media brutalize children and undermine the social order. While that may be partly true (and a nonsequitur), seldom asked and rarely publicized have been broader questions of policy: Why should media organizations, established institutions of society, undermine their existence by promoting violence? Are incitation and imitation really the principal consequences of exposure to violence? Are there consequences that may benefit media institutions and their sponsors? If so, what are they? Can they help explain the persistence of media policies despite public criticism and international embarrassment over flooding many cultures with images of violence and terror?

The conventional debate between those who fear imitation and those who claim popular demand begs the point. Although conflict is essential and violence is legitimate in news and drama, there is no evidence of popular demand for violence per se. Perhaps one or two out of the ten highest rated television programs are violent shows. Most television (and news) violence are formula-bound, cheap to produce, "travel" better than other fare, have a minimal attention value, and can thus be profitable commodities despite their mediocre ratings.

It is clear that violence-inspired mayhem poses no threat to modern societies. On the contrary, the violence-terror scenario, as circuses of old, may function to isolate and annihilate, or at least control such threats.

The research evidence suggests that prolonged exposure to stories and scenes of violence and terror can mobilize aggressive tendencies, can desensitize some and isolate others, can trigger violence in a few and intimidate the many. But lawlessness and massive disorder relate more to illicit commerce, wars, unemployment, and other social trends than to the violence index we have been compiling since 1967. Small-scale terrorists have toppled no state without a collapse of power from other causes; mostly they have provoked reprisals, repression, and an excuse for invasions.

It may well be that a media system strikes an implicit balance between the costs and benefits of the violence scenario. On one hand there is the cost of public anxiety, and accommodation to injustice and inhumanity. On the other hand is the less visible but historically and empirically demonstrable gain in power—personal and institutional—derived from the ability to depersonalize enemies; to cultivate vulnerability and dependence in subordinates; to achieve instant support for swift and tough measures at home and abroad in what is presented as an exceedingly mean and scary world. The scenario provides its producers with the sense and reality of power, and its persistence may be understood, among other things, in terms of its utility for those who define and control its uses.

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